A Painter Trades Sex for Romance

Romantic love for Lisa Yuskavage is something we can deride as unrealistic, yet its sweet, naïve simplicity reminds us of a youthful ideal.

Dennis Kardon December 9, 2018

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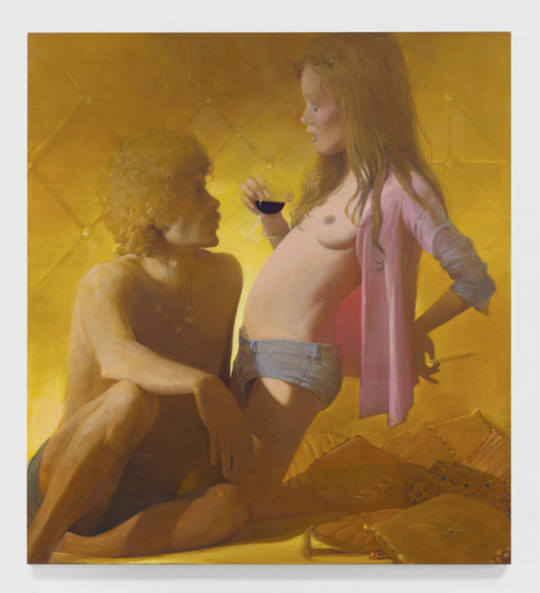

Lisa Yuskavage, "Golden Couple" (2018) (© Lisa Yuskavage, image courtesy the artist and David Zwirner)

Lisa Yuskavage has always made troubling paintings whose impact results from making viewers uncomfortable. The root of the discomfort may be a feeling of ambivalence about what exactly these pictures portray. Whether you try and gloss over Yuskavage's depictions of over-sexualized, vacant, self-involved women, in order to revel in the lush paint, light touch, and sumptuous color, or whether you ignore the intellectual and formal heft of her work to decry what a seems to be self-hating misogyny, you would be missing the point. The point *is* the ambivalence, the inability to reconcile the subject matter depicted and what that content amounts to in our minds. With Yuskavage's paintings, one's reaction becomes part of the art, and deserves to be analyzed along with the artworks' other aspects.

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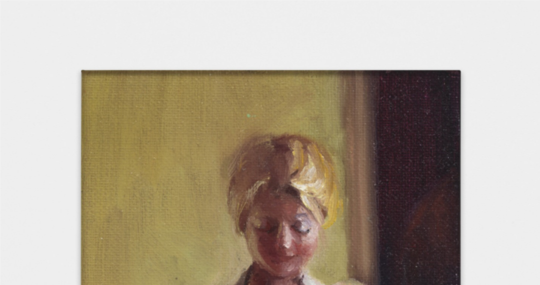
Two new exhibitions of the artist's work, at the uptown and downtown locations of David Zwirner, provide a new opportunity to contemplate exactly how her paintings provoke that queasy feeling in the gut. On 19th Street is *Babie Brood: Small Paintings 1985–2018*, a survey of 91 paintings, none exceeding 18 inches, that have served as experiments, studies for, and further explorations of major works over the past 33 years. On 69th Street is an exhibition of eight large new paintings, mostly portraying heterosexual couples.

Installation view, *Lisa Yuskavage New Paintings*, David Zwirner, New York, 2018 (image courtesy David Zwirner)

Yuskavage's small paintings, spanning 33 years, make you realize, regardless of your gender, how much crazy, infantilizing shit about women lurks in our cultural subconscious. This is at the heart of the work's ambivalence. The hazy Rothko/Turner color fields her characters inhabit don't really seem to be of this world. As if looking through a soda-pop fog, they evoke a world of childish attitudes. These women are not ideals; they are witless, erotic archetypes that have escaped into our brains from old girlie magazines our parents owned. And though they may make us cringe (and heterosexual men might be discomfited to see every stereotypical male subconscious erotic desire simultaneously dissected and ridiculed), Yuskavage seem to portray them with a strange sympathy. Despite their often humiliating scenarios, these women never seem to exhibit anger, disgust, or, significantly, shame, and the idea that Yuskavage is somehow protective of these strange creatures potentially complicates our considerations of and reactions to them.



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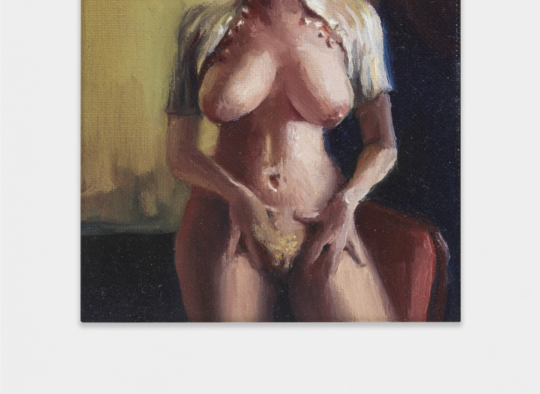
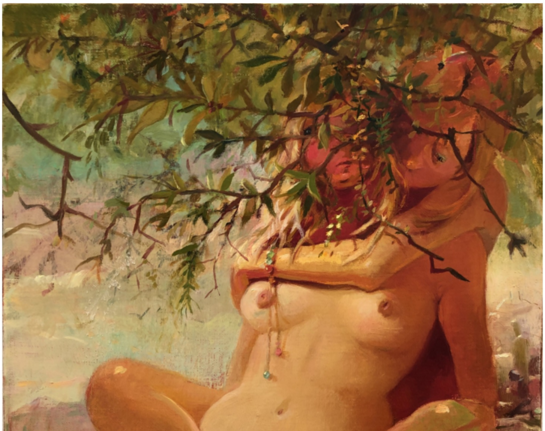
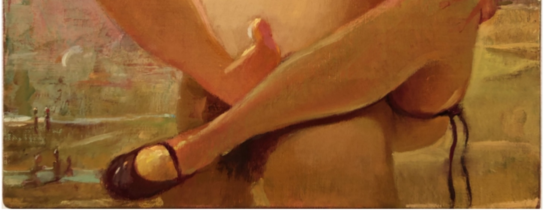


Lisa Yuskavage, “Screwing Her Pussy on Straight” (1997) (© Lisa Yuskavage, image courtesy the artist and David Zwirner)

Yuskavage’s uncomfortably sexualized female archetypes have an affinity with Kara Walker’s black paper silhouettes that use stereotypes of Antebellum slavery figures to deconstruct embedded racial prejudices. The *Babie Brood* paintings, when seen together, seem to similarly psychoanalyze the notion of a woman so internalizing the role of pleasure object that she mistakes it for an actual feeling of pleasure. There are even two paintings that refer to therapy: “Transference Portrait of my Shrink in Her Starched Nightgown with My Face and Her Hair” and “Transference Portrait” (1995 and 1996, respectively).

The *Babie Brood* paintings indicate that for the first 20 years of her career, Yuskavage typically painted a single woman at the center of a colored rectangle, directing attention mostly along the body of the central figure. Make no mistake: little appears arbitrary, in even the most seemingly dashed off paintings. She is deliberate about what details she articulates and what dissolves into the background, what immediately draws our gaze, and what we notice upon further scrutiny. In the 8 by 6 1/4-inch “Sweetpuss” (1996), depicting a kneeling, topless, long-nippled, teacup-holding, blond bimbette with tiny ballerina figures in the background, everything — from the texture of the stocking to the subtle differentiation of color between torso and background — seems casually yet carefully calculated for the reactions it might elicit.

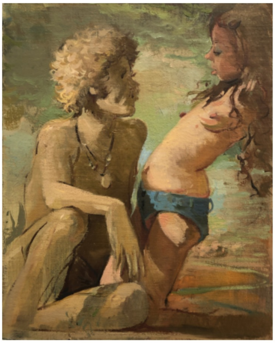




Lisa Yuskavage, “Mutualism” (2006), oil on Linen 13 x 11 1/8 inches (collection Glenn and Amanda Fuhrman, NY, image courtesy FLAG Art Foundation, photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

Gradually more figures appear, first as bystanders, but, starting around 2005, the lonely single girl becomes two entwined women, less lovers than a divided female consciousness apparently comforting herself. In retrospect it suggests a healing phase in preparation for taking the crème pies in the face: beginning in 2008 the artist paints portraits of semi-nude women with faces covered in whipped crème and bits of piecrust, who nevertheless display a good-natured, winsome charm.

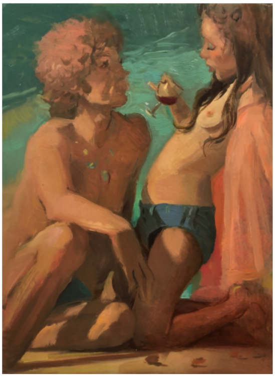
With her new paintings, Yuskavage has replaced her female targets of erotic deconstruction with representations of romantic relationships. Her self-involved, neotenous sex kittens, with child consciousnesses, after having been comforted and pied, and in the early 2010s, having faced bleak, rural dystopias, have become more like actual people and now seek comfort in heteronormative romantic and sexual relationships. And the men she has added enact very different roles from the earlier portrayals of women. After starting as observers several years ago, they progressed to representations of vulnerable or damaged masculinity, and in the new paintings seem to embody validation or appreciation of their partners’ attractiveness.



Lisa Yuskavage, “Phil and Eileen” (2018), oil on canvas board, 10 x 8 1/8 inches (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

And it feels that Yuskavage has matured as well. While these young, hot, slim bodies, glowing with the breathless blush of new love, can seem annoyingly saccharine, the paintings are much more formally complex and endeavor to portray the feelings of the people as they respond to one another.

Babie Brood allows us to trace the development of several of the new large paintings from the small studies — for example, “Golden Couple,” in the uptown show, and “Phil and Eileen,” and “Phillip and Irene” downtown (all 2018). All three paintings feature a blond, frizzy-haired, mustachioed and bare-chested man, bedecked in love beads, and a woman with long, straight blond hair and denim shorts loosely fitted over her thin pelvis. He is half-crouched with right forearm resting on knee and gazing appreciatively at his partner, while she thrusts her taut belly forward and kneels next to him in a favorite Yuskavage pose (reminiscent of the posture in “Sweetpuss”), her rounded back exposing her small, bare breasts.

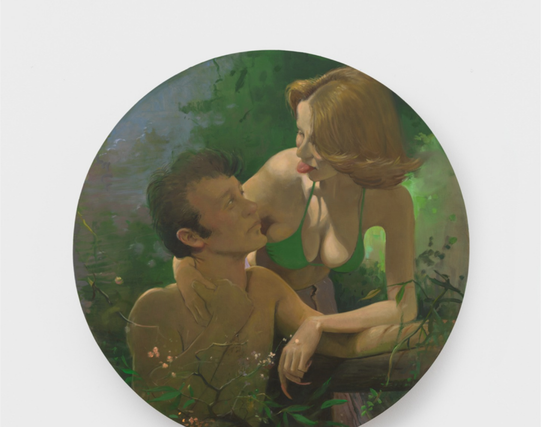


Lisa Yuskavage, "Phillip and Irene" (2018), oil on wood panel, 8 x 6 inches (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

The first study, "Phil and Eileen," portrays an elaborate outdoor landscape, replete with a clouded sky and a zigzagging road in the distance, with the couple merely sketched in. Eileen has the pouty lower lip and cartoonish expression of some of the artist's earlier floozies. In the second small study, "Philip and Irene," the landscape becomes more abstract and figures are more developed. Irene has donned a red shirt, which still hides her left hand. Philip stares into Irene's blue-shadowed eyes, gazing down at her tipped goblet.

The large final painting, simply titled "Golden Couple," doesn't feel labored, despite its many new, nuanced articulations, and reveals what details became most important to Yuskavage. She moved the lovers indoors and set them against one of her signature diamond-quilted, yellow-ochre backgrounds, adding a scattering of throw pillows on the floor. I've often wondered what her quilted backgrounds signify. Here, it feels like a combined sex room and padded cell. Perhaps it's just meant to feel soft, but it seems to confine the scene to an imagined interior mental space. Among the most dramatic of the artist's new effects is intense incandescent light behind the bodies of the couple, creating a vector of negative space that cleaves them and directs attention to the point at which her crotch meets his body.

Yuskavage uses these vectors — whether slivers of negative space, curves of the body, angles of arms and hands, or highlighted details — to organize our attention in order to gradually reveal new facts that change the way we think about the painting. For example, while the man (facing toward us) is mostly enveloped in the deep ochre shadow, the arc of the woman's upper torso allows the light to illuminate and sculpt her face and body. Though in deep shade, the pinpoint black pupil of his right eye is visible as it gazes up and meets the tiny amount of her left pupil, which she demurely trains on him. Her mouth is slightly open, as if about to speak, and his cheeks are slightly hollowed and lips are puckered as if to whistle, or appreciatively exhale.



Lisa Yuskavage, "The Tongue Tondo" (2018) (© Lisa Yuskavage, image courtesy the artist and David Zwirner)

In addition, the backlighting reveals that the young woman is now holding a small white rectangle behind her back, pursed between thumb and index finger. Is it paper? A concert ticket? Perhaps a letter like the one held by the maid in Vermeer's "Mistress and Maid"? Her arched posture signifies not just revealing, but also hiding and withholding. "Golden Couple" thus becomes a painting about teasing, an attitude also evident in "Tongue Tondo," (2018) in which a woman sticks out her tongue at the man she is caressing while they kneel in a swamp.

Teasing is an attitude at play in much of Yuskavage's work, between the artist and her audience — pointed, but sexily breezy. The offhand but calculated precision with which she reveals all the little poignant moments in her paintings may delay our registering the 1960s soft-porn clichés of her scenarios. Yuskavage now locates the ambivalence in the aesthetic awe of the painted scenarios that we know better than to believe in. Romantic love for Lisa Yuskavage is something we can deride as unrealistic, yet its sweet, naïve simplicity reminds us of a youthful ideal that still exerts its gravitational attraction. In these new paintings she provides a formal pictorial structure that is as complex and intricate as any modern relationship, in order to depict relationships totally depleted of believability, so that we find ourselves unmoored from understanding our own conflicted feelings about love and desire.

Lisa Yuskavage: New Paintings *continues at David Zwirner (34 E. 69th Street, Upper East Side, Manhattan) and* Lisa Yuskavage: Babie Brood: Small Paintings 1985-2019 *continues at David Zwirner (533 W. 19th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan), both through December 15.*

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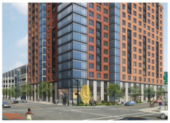

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